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Questioning democracy promotion: Belarus' response to the 'colour revolutions'

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Questioning democracy promotion: Belarus' response to the 'colour revolutions'

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The article focuses on the aftermath of the colour revolutions by analysing and questioning the *real success*, as often depicted by the West, of democracy promotion in the East European region. First of all, the article challenges the conventional logic of democracy promotion – even when backed by moral reasoning and resource availability – as sufficient and adequate for instigating democratic change in non-liberal regimes. By examining the case of Belarus it further contends that authoritarian regimes effectively learn to resist and counteract foreign-led democracy promotion, and often do so *legitimately*, with a minimal use of force. The article concludes that in order to exercise democracy promotion (if such a thing is possible at all) a far deeper understanding of autocratic narratives is needed, associated with a much closer look at societal norms and values, as well as an individual country's geopolitical resources and strategies.

Keywords: colour revolutions; democracy promotion; Belarus; authoritarian regimes; societal norms and values

> There will be no revolution in Belarus … Those who entice *democratisation* in the former Soviet Union are yet to rip off the fruit of their actions …[1]

The early 2000s witnessed a series of events which later became popularized as 'colour revolutions'.[2] These public protests, which often adopted a colour as a symbol, included the 'Rose Revolution' in Georgia (2003), 'Orange Revolution' in Ukraine (2004) and the 'Tulip Revolution' in Kyrgyzstan (2005).[3] They were arguably successful in overthrowing previous authoritarian regimes and facilitating democratic breakthroughs.[4] Moreover, in their strikingly similar patterns, and involvement of Western non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as part of the international diffusion process, they all centred on elections as the key mechanism for challenging the incumbency.

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The 'second generation' of similar events (2005–2009), however, was unambiguously less successful. In 2005–2006 revolutionary attempts were made across a number of states of the Former Soviet Union (Russia, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Belarus), with comparable events initiated and equally failing elsewhere.[5] Many of these undertakings were effectively thwarted before they occurred, and others were sweepingly suppressed, with a minimal use of force. This necessarily raises a question – which also opens up a wider debate on 'democracy promotion' in the region – whether the autocratic regimes have learned to resist and even counteract externally promoted 'electoral revolutions'.

There is no straightforward answer to this question. As some scholars observe,[6] for many autocratic regimes witnessing what were widely perceived as feigned revolutionary activities in their neighbourhood, the urgency to learn to prevent their subversive effect became *realpolitik* thus necessitating moderately oppressive tactics concomitant with open hostility to 'rapacious Western interests'.[7] However, regimes' learning is only one side of the story, which would be incomplete without contextualizing each 'non-colour' case with the purpose of understanding the real (far deeper) reasons behind the failed (foreign-led) revolutionary enticement. Belarus as 'the last dictatorship in Europe' serves as a curious testimony to these uncanny logics of 'democracy promotion' and 'autocratic diffusion'[8] revealing its own and *not-so-authoritarian* narrative with which the 'dictatorship' withstood its electoral turmoil in 2006.[9]

On both the day itself and the day after the presidential election in March 2006, protestors took their discontent to the streets of Minsk, thus closely following the *Democratic Revolutionary Handbook*.[10] Prior to this, many young revolutionaries travelled as far afield as Serbia and Ukraine to learn about the strategies and tactics of regime subversion to be applied in their own home. This consequently resulted in a 10,000-strong public protest on the day of the election,[11] a five-day camp resistance under physically and emotionally strenuous conditions, occasional clashes with riot police, and over 1000 arrests in the aftermath of the event.[12] In other words, the prerequisites to galvanize an 'electoral revolution' were evidently present in Belarus, but somehow failed to develop into a wider mass mobilization, despite the fact that the majority of Belarusians (70%), according to an IISEPS opinion poll,[13] were aware of and even discussed the event with their close friends and relations. This surprising public withdrawal from allegedly a 'people's event' is even more surprising when we consider the relatively moderate use of violence by authorities (including their actions prior to and during the event),[14] and the feeble and often embarrassing attempts of the state media to conceal the reality.[15] In other words, contrary to the anticipated draconian measures of Lukashenko's dictatorship, only limited (and largely non-violent) state interference was used to counteract insurgencies.

In the light of the revolutionary 'contagion' and seemingly propitious conditions for popular mobilization, why did the Belarusians not rise up against the 'outpost of tyranny'? Evidently, the country was as far away from a 'tipping point' of political change as a 'revolutionary situation' could be without its

constitutive elements: a people's desire to rise and governors' inability to rule.[16] Interestingly, this kind of 'controversy' of allegedly people's revolutions is not solely attributable to the 'exceptional' case of Belarus; instead, it appears to be broadly illustrative of far deeper problems related to 'democracy promotion' and 'autocratic resilience' in the region.[17] In this article I limit myself to an analysis of nuances of the 2006 attempt at democracy promotion in Belarus. I focus on efforts by the anti-regime opposition, encouraged by the West. I also seek to explain the government's response to it. In what follows, I will first discuss the limitations of the precarious 'international diffusion' model that has explicitly dominated the debate on 'colour revolutions', and will offer some counter-points premised on Lane's argument of 'revolutionary coup d'état'.[18] In the second part of this article, I will examine Way's theory of structural factors[19] in order to evaluate the Belarusian response to colour revolutions in more detail. The 'structural factors' perspective, here interpreted more broadly, is not only essential for understanding the reasons of success/failure of the recent attempt at 'international diffusion' in Eastern Europe, but also for far deeper understanding of why democratization by Western design may not necessarily succeed in the region, despite the perceived leverage of or linkage with the West.[20] Finally (and by way of conclusion) I will discuss the relevance of legitimacy that underpins Lukashenko's regime thus alluding to a possible counterintuitive 'balance' between publicly perceived societal needs and values, and respective government performance, the understanding of which somewhat shifts the focus of 'democracy promotion' from the impatient 'when' to the improbable 'if', thus questioning whether external democracy promotion may succeed in Eastern Europe and elsewhere by similar means.

International diffusion or revolutionary coup d'état?

Much of the recent literature written on colour revolutions focuses on 'international diffusion' as a mechanism of emulating successful narratives of 'democracy promotion' in the region – through training and sharing ideas and resources to direct involvement – with the intention to overthrow existing autocratic regimes.[21] This scholarship has been particularly influential in debating successful international diffusion (after the trials in Southern Europe in the late 1990s) in the recent 'colour' cases of Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan. Yet it appears far less comprehensive for dealing with those less victorious stories that by far dominate the 'second tide' of the 'colour revolutions' from 2005 onwards, and therefore needs closer examination in order to understand why some 'revolutions' fail and 'how Western policy misses the mark'.[22]

According to Bunce and Wolchik, 'diffusion can be defined as a process wherein new ideas, institutions, policies, models or repertoires of behaviour spread geographically … whether within a given state or across states'.[23] In the case of Eastern Europe, it refers to 'an electoral model of democratisation' that was developed in Bulgaria, Romania and Slovakia between 1996 and 1998, and

in Serbia in 2000, whereby trained opposition activists use fraudulent elections to mobilize popular support to defeat weak autocratic incumbents.

By aiming to introduce 'democracy from below', all these revolutionary activities shared a common strategy: targeting the removal of incumbency through mass protests occurring within a constitutional framework (non-violent), focusing on allegedly fraudulent electoral procedures and drawing on young and enthusiastic activists to form the core for mobilizing larger crowds by conventional and other means, including popular entertainment and modern technology (use of mobile phones, internet and media resources).[24]

Furthermore, as Bunce and Wolchik assert,[25] in order to make international diffusion 'available for possible export', a set of three factors should be met. First of all, potential revolutionaries need to closely follow the electoral model, which offers a range of strategies and tactics as to how to topple the incumbent regime[26]; second, the importing countries should have similar conditions – 'put succinctly, common contexts and common identities'; and finally, there should exist 'collaborative networks' that 'cross the boundaries' and 'provide incentives for actors on both sides of the diffusion process to embrace transplantation'.[27]

The relevance of the third factor for 'democracy promotion' in the region, and especially for the occurrence of 'the colour revolutions', should not be underestimated,[28] as it has essentially – through the provision of logistical, intellectual and financial resources – been the driving force of international diffusion in Eastern Europe. Open and unabashed exposure of Western involvement and sponsorship – being part of these 'collaborative networks' – were indisputably a key feature of regional democracy promotion. International NGOs and aid organizations were particularly instrumental for the promotion and organization of large-scale entertainment events including payments to the attendees themselves.[29] As Way contends:

> Transnational networks of previously successful activists, with assistance from the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and other organisations as well as from experts in non-violent protest such as Gene Sharp, are credited with stimulating transitions in countries that lacked sufficient prerequisites for revolution and where the fall of autocrats was 'not predicated by most analysts'.[30]

Drawing on the scale and arguable success of the first electoral revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, and their repetitive character, some scholars even suggested conceptualizing them as an instance of modular development premised on the imitation or indeed emulation of 'the prior successful example of others'.[31] In Beissinger's interpretation, for example, all these revolutionary activities should not be viewed as independent cases, 'but rather [as] an interrelated modular phenomenon in which opposition groups borrowed frames, strategies, repertoires, and even logos from previously successful efforts and gained inspiration from the acts of others'.[32] He further insists that if all structural advantages of the electoral revolutions are taken into account there may be further anticipation

of electoral uprisings in the region based on the electoral cycles of the existing regimes.[33]

Yet there are a number of reasons to believe that modular diffusion has run its course in the region, and even more, that its allegedly successful first trials clearly failed to produce any noticeable change of regime, let alone to achieve democratization.[34] On reflection, it becomes apparent that while these 'revolutions' may have been legitimated in democratic terms by involving some 'staged' mass activities, they should be more appropriately termed not as 'people's events', but instead as 'revolutionary coup d'état'[35] aided by Western sponsorship. These 'colour cases', as Lane asserts further, 'were more than palace putsches but they were not classical revolutions',[36] either in their intentions or their outcome. They did involve some mass mobilization but they did not produce any system/regime change. Instead, what seems to have occurred is the instalment of new political incumbents instigated through the agency of mass popular support and Western orchestration.[37]

These electoral revolutions, especially those of the second (2005–2009) generation, which Chaulia suitably depicted as 'political convulsions'[38] have evidently failed to take into account domestic circumstances (including the precarious legitimacy) of some existing autocracies, and instead focused on maximizing 'electoral opportunities' in a situation when oppositional forces explicitly struggled or indeed were unable to mobilize public support for a legitimate transfer of power. As David Lane qualifies it further:

> What is portrayed in the media as 'people's power' is in reality an elite manipulated demonstration. While the masses may be captivated by euphoric revolutionary ideology, they are in political terms instrumentalities of indigenous counter elites, often encouraged by foreigners with their own agendas. If successful, rather than such revolutions leading to significant socio-political change, a circulation of elites follows the ousting of former rulers or their cooption into a new elite structure.[39]

This is precisely what happened as a result of the first 'wave' of colour takeovers: not a regime change but a change of governing elite in countries like Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan now being popularly associated with anarchy, corruption and new forms of authoritarianism.[40] On the contrary, the 'second generation' of colour changeovers has managed to maintain the existing status quo thus resisting (with a minimal use of force) the temptation of externally orchestrated revolutions. Belarus offers a particularly striking example of how the 'revolutionary contagion' failed to mobilize the masses, and exposes the need to explore the roots of public 'inertia' with reference to regime legitimacy and societal values – the principal focus of this article.

Interestingly, in many cases of 'revolutionary coup d'état' of the second generation especially – that is, involving mass protest but no system change per se[41] – a single crucial element was clearly missing – that of 'domestic receptivity'.[42] Without considering each case individually it is difficult to generalize whether 'lacking [legitimate] domestic partners'[43] was essentially due to pre-emptive

actions by the autocratic regimes, or more broadly, due to the indigenous conditions (including structural and psychological predispositions of the population) unsuitable for making revolutions. In either circumstance, a simple wisdom related to the promotion of internal change through manipulation of societal norms and values – Nye's formula[44] – which was placed at the heart of the US-led 'colour revolutions' in Eastern Europe[45] was evidently wrong-handled here. In his earlier work Nye explicitly claimed that only those 'countries that are closest to global norms of liberalism, pluralism, and autonomy; those with the most access to multiple channels of communication; and those whose credibility is enhanced by their domestic and international performance'[46] are likely to gain from international diffusion, in undertaking their (r)evolutionary change. The countries of the second generation of 'colour democratic breakthroughs', no matter how advantageous their electoral opportunities may have been, evidently failed to meet these criteria thus underlining the importance of contextualizing 'democracy promotion' for each given case, and considering structural factors propitious or otherwise for undertaking regime change with external assistance. In the meantime, following the commentary of *RIA-Novosti*, one needs to emphasize that 'presidential elections in Belarus, and their aftermath, showed that "orange" technologies may be applicable even in Belarusian conditions, but they may not necessarily be effective'.[47]

Structural factors: regime's learning curve

Contrary to the wisdom of '*external* democracy promotion', Way argues that 'diffusion may explain *fewer* aspects of recent postcommunist revolutions than is sometimes argued'.[48] What matters instead are the structural factors that lay foundations for any possible change to occur, and which may eventually develop into a revolutionary situation, with de-legitimation of the incumbent authority. Experiencing international 'contagion' on one's doorstep and having domestic revolutionaries trained in accordance with the *Democratic Revolutionary Handbook*[49] are not sufficient 'ingredients' to initiate a revolution *à la carte*. Way asserts that 'revolutions have often failed even when oppositions have adopted the "right" strategies from abroad. The most striking case is Belarus, which garnered serious attention and input from Serb, Slovak, Ukrainian, and other activists in the run-up to the 2006 presidential elections'.[50] He emphasized that 'Lukashenka's opponents seemed to do everything they were supposed to and arguably followed the "model" much more faithfully [than their counterparts]. Yet no large-scale support materialized, and Lukashenka never came close to being unseated'.[51]

Instead, as Way authoritatively contends, it is the structural factors that play a far more decisive role in explaining 'why some postcommunist authoritarian regimes have been more vulnerable than others to opposition threats'.[52] In particular, Way singles out two broad categories of structural factors that may explain the dynamics of recent electoral turnovers: (i) the strength of a country's ties with the West; and (ii) the strength of the incumbent regime's autocratic party or state. Evidently, it was the 'lame-duck' effect of the incumbency combined with actively

exercised Western leverage over the country that led to the toppling of the previous autocratic regimes in Georgia and Ukraine, under the well-organized activities of the opposition. In countries where the leadership enjoys solid structural support including psychological predispositions of the population (for example, Belarus), little can be done externally, in order to stage full scale mobilization and revolutionary change:

> Lukashenka's success at remaining in power has less to do with any particular strategies adopted in response to postcommunist revolutions than with his already overwhelming domination over the opposition.[53]

In other words, although revolution may have been attempted in Belarus in 2006, arguably at the behest of the West, the endeavour clearly yielded no 'revolutionary situation' there, thus highlighting the relevance of structural factors propitious (or otherwise) for democratization.

Pre-emptive authoritarianism

In Belarus' case, limited linkage with the West (partly instigated by the West itself)[54] and long-term pre-emptive actions of Lukashenko's government made the 'colour revolution' in Belarus destined to fail. The concept of 'pre-emptive authoritarianism' was well developed by Vital Silitski[55] to underline the regime's learning ability to survive by adopting preventative measures to combat the democratic contagion. Over the 15 years of its struggle for survival Lukashenko's regime has naturally perfected the policy of pre-emption and, more importantly, is constantly learning to survive by emulating consensus between the regime's performance and perceived societal needs.[56] There is a plethora of instruments that the regime can deploy – from institutional through to cultural, ideological, tactical and other structural tools – in order to enhance its survival skills and public satisfaction, while also learning to strike first.

It is correct to insist that over the years Lukashenko's regime has mastered an unlimited grip on power by actively utilizing principles and instruments of pre-emption, and prepared well to meet the challenges of regional democratic contagion. In brief,[57] *institutionally*, to ensure legality and stability of his authority, Lukashenko has (i) re-written the constitution thus acquiring unlimited powers (including legislative), and removing restrictions on his stay in office; (ii) eliminated noncompliant elements of society, either by legally limiting the scope for their activities, through fear/intimidation, or by removing them physically from the scene (as in the infamous political disappearances of 1999–2001), thus enhancing the perceived efficacy of his government; (iii) installed new structural pillars (presidential vertical; police/armed forces) to exercise minimal coercion when necessary; and (iv) altered the format of other institutions (parliament; educational establishments; civil society; etc.) to act in unison with presidential propaganda. *Culturally*, he has (i) defeated the nationalism of the Belarusian Popular Front, which was a driving force for independence in the neighbouring Baltic states,

becoming associated instead with a new type of nationalism building on a post-transitional identity and the relative economic stability of the country; (ii) removed from circulation any symbolic reminders of the pre-Soviet identity (flag, literature, the use of Belarusian language for teaching); and instead (iii) promoted Soviet/state patriotism and its relevant symbolic manifestations to boost public nostalgia for the Soviet 'nanny' state; and (iv) inculcated public awareness of Lukashenko's Belarus, vividly embodied by the slogans of his election campaigns 'For Belarus' (2001) and 'For *Independent* Belarus' (2006) which in the eyes of many is an oasis of stability, security and equal opportunities. *Ideologically*, he has (i) launched a concept of egalitarian state nationalism drawing on 'three essential pillars: Belarus uniqueness, unity and sovereignty'[58]; (ii) re-introduced ideological education and propaganda in workplaces; (iii) actively promoted the rise of BPSM (Belaruski Republikanski Sayuz Moladzi – Belarusian Republican Union of Youth) by making its membership a tacit requirement for entry to high education; and (iv) supported the activities of *Belaya Rus*, a popular social movement staffed with Lukashenko's supporters, as a potential foundation for building the Party of Power, as/where necessary. *Tactically*, not only has Lukashenko (i) literally and otherwise decapitated, discredited and demobilized the opposition by forcing them into their self-exile or indeed ghettoizing them into a manageable compound; he has also (ii) learned to legally, militarily and ideologically quell public unrest by initiating a number of laws that would thwart public mobilization in the making.[59] Finally, *international* pre-emption has included Lukashenko's joining the non-aligned states[60] in 2006 to withstand the pressure of the West, and continuously seeking Russia's (and the Commonwealth of Independent States' (CIS)) political backing[61] in order to ensure his 'international' legitimacy. In other words, by learning to act first, largely owing to the country's relative economic stability and popular legitimacy of the president, Lukashenko's regime has developed an enviable immunity to democratic change, associated with the wave of coloured revolutions in the neighbourhood.[62]

Anti-revolutionary measures

However, this is not to contend that Lukashenko's regime did not take any immediate precautionary measures in order to ensure that the government would survive the potential turmoil of colour revolutions. On the contrary, actions to prevent 'orange contagion' in Belarus were well calculated and painstakingly followed through, thus turning Lukashenko's statement that 'there will be no rose, orange, or banana revolution in Belarus'[63] into a categorical imperative for the government to act promptly and to be in full control of the situation. Early precautionary measures included intensified state propaganda through 'countless reports, documentaries, propaganda broadcasts, and newspaper articles to explain to the population the official take on the revolutions'.[64] Particularly influential in setting the popular anti-revolutionary mood were TV broadcasts including controversial documentaries *Spiritual War* and *Conspirology* by Yury

Azarionok, portraying the battle between the president and the opposition 'bought out by the West'. More subtle productions included a series of documentaries *Belarus: The Look from Outside* and *Fifteen* reviewing social and economic developments in the former Soviet Union and beyond, and praising the achievements of Lukashenko's government.[65] Pop-propaganda[66] also intensified in the form of mass concerts and other entertainment (street parades, sports events, harvest festivals) delivering images of green-and-red 'flag-waving' happy crowds and official establishment faces mingling with commoners to counteract the effect of orange or any other revolutionary colour used in the neighbourhood to entice the public: for example, a technique also effectively deployed by Nazarbaev in Kazakhstan to counteract revolution.[67]

Furthermore, early precautions also included some 'hard measures', for example, by putting a considerable part of the Belarusian army onto a full security alert. In particular, following the Kyrgyz events, in March 2005, the president requested full military mobilization of the 28 battalion in Baranovichi (near Minsk), and additionally recalled 2000 reserve troops into military action.[68]

Security forces also intensified their input in the struggle against the colour revolution. Notably, in December 2005 the KGB, which still functions under the same infamous name in Belarus, issued a document titled 'Analytical report on colour revolutions: a possible scenario for Belarus', prepared for dissemination in the House of Representatives for the MPs to 'work' with their respective constituencies in order to prevent the occurrence of unrest. As KGB chairman General Stephan Sukhorenko commented on 2 December 2005: 'We have sufficient information to disseminate to our deputies, so that they can prepare their electors and inform them of *our understanding* of the situation'.[69] The analytical report contained detailed information on how colour revolutions occurred in the region (paying particular attention to Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan), who organized them and how precisely they were staged in order to overthrow existing governments. According to the report, a revolution would be staged to follow four crucial steps in order to achieve leadership replacement: from facilitating popular perception of incumbency as tyrannical to exposing elections as fraudulent and demanding justice by taking people's protest to the streets. The report also offered some details of the possible toppling of Lukashenko's regime and what precautionary measures needed be taken in order to prevent such activities.[70]

On the eve of the presidential election, on 19 March 2006, every mobile phone user in Minsk received a text message cautioning against attending demonstrations organized by the opposition, and suggesting that all participants of unlawful protests would be 'severely battered'.[71] A day earlier General Sukhovenko publicly announced that all participants of unauthorized public actions during or after the election would be charged under the Terrorist Act and could be subject to 20 years imprisonment. He further insisted that the KGB discovered a secret plot involving the opposition staging protests against the president and even possible detonation of four schools in the capital during/after the election.[72]

The official propaganda went into full swing on the day of the election and thereafter: the official media distributed fabricated images of homosexuals and drug addicts, and even alleged that contagious diseases were spreading in October Square where the tents were staged.[73] The spin continued after the crackdown on the demonstrators: the official media broadcast pictures of riot policemen and official TV crews violently beaten by opposition supporters and hospitalized with severe head and chest injuries. Furthermore, according to Wilson,[74] 'Lukashenko's "technologists" added the anti-Polish element and successfully demonised Milinkevich [the then leader of the united opposition] as a stooge of the Vatican and Warsaw kresy[75] – politics, as well as the USA. Milinkevich's popularity in foreign capitals was therefore a double-edged sword.'

On the day of the election, in order to handle the prospect of civilian disquiet, Lukashenko recalled to full alert 110,000 paramilitary forces (especially to handle the aftermath of the election), including OMON, a special force branch, which were further supplemented by a significant number of reserves, and a newly established special police force led by Colonel Dmitry Pavlichenko, who was allegedly involved in commanding 'death squads' aimed at murdering Lukashenko's prominent opponents. Furthermore, as reported by other sources,[76] Lukashenko's personal bodyguard force was activated to include about 200 enlisted men, 'specially trained and equipped with cutting edge technology',[77] and selected on grounds of personal loyalty to the president. Additionally, a powerful and highly secretive SWAT team, 'Alma', belonging to the Ministry of Interior and paramilitary quick reaction squad SOBR were on full alert to counteract any insurgence. None of the above forces, however, was deployed (or even seen on the streets), except for Colonel Dmitry Pavlichenko's squad used to disband the demonstration of a few thousand people led by Kozulin during Freedom Day on 25 March 2006. Nevertheless, protestors still faced paramilitary batons and the threat of rubber bullets, allegedly fired at some by Pavlichenko's brigade from carabines C-23 'Selezen' designed for shooting with rubber bullets and gas.[78]

This was the only occasion where the state used moderate force to counteract civic unrest. There were other 'localized' and small-scale clashes with the paramilitary police, however, generally speaking, public demonstrations (including the disbursement of the tent city) were handled in a moderately peaceful manner by the authorities and paramilitary forces (some of which – especially the Pavlichenko squad – were known for their extreme brutality and violence).

This relatively mild and controlled response from the authorities to hitherto unprecedented (for Belarus) levels of public protest was quite unexpected, thus taking the opposition by surprise. The Russian media subsequently commented that 'Batska's [Nation's Father] opponents awaited brutal oppression of the protests: they had been warned about this in advance … However, there was an impression that neither Kozulin, nor Milinkevich was ready for this peaceful reaction, and could not handle the crowds sensibly'.[79] Apparently, 'militia behaved reservedly, no OMON forces were seen on the square, and although threatened, no armoured military vehicles with water guns were deployed either'.[80] Some

observers noted that despite Batska's quite emotional personality,[81] the authorities stayed in control of the 'revolutionary situation' in Belarus by integrating all their resources (from military readiness to the effective use of state propaganda) into a coordinated response to thwart political unrest in the making:

> Belarus has demonstrated a relatively new phenomenon for the post-soviet space – how to counteract a planned but unaccomplished revolution…The state and civil society in Belarus were too robust to be subverted by the political crisis developing on its doorsteps.[82]

Therefore, there was nothing surprising in Lukashenko's 'elegant and convincing' victory in presidential election[83] and his peaceful curbing of the planned but failed electoral revolution in the country.

What was surprising instead was the limited use of coercion and violence in these clearly volatile and nerve-racking circumstances for the autocratic leadership in the region. One commentator noted: 'In order to defeat Lukashenko, his opponents need to learn to win heart and minds not only of intelligentsia, businessmen and students, but also of someone like tetia Natasha…[who said] "Of course I voted for Lukashenko. Because we are now used to him. He is not new, and life has actually become more stable with him."'[84]

Why was an authoritarian response NOT necessary in Belarus?

Accounting for domestic structural factors thus not only elicits some general explanation of why revolutions fail or succeed in the region and beyond, but also suggests the need to 'contextualize' democracy promotion in order to understand the regime's endurance and its logic for survival in each 'non-colour' case.

There is little doubt that Lukashenko's government has used all its resources to build a regime, which many would describe as 'legitimate', that is, enjoying extensive public support.[85] Through autocratic suppression, institutional means of prevention, government economic performance, active propaganda and a growing sense of cultural identity amongst the Belarusians – identity mastered by the president – Lukashenko has managed to achieve an enviable balance between his government and the Belarusians at large, expressed through public endorsement of his regime. People now evaluate his and others' performance (that of home-grown opposition and of governments in their neighbourhood) through the actions (and the outcome these actions entail – usually of order and stability) of their own president, with lasting and largely negative perceptions of any external or internal challenges for the incumbency.[86] It would be absolutely true to say that the specificity of Lukashenko's regime lies with (i) his own actions that he clearly directed to safeguard his authority over the years, including achieving relative economic stability in the country; and more crucially, (ii) with his own electorate which proved to be so malleable for responding to Lukashenko's leadership, and thus generating the most enduring feature of his regime – its

genuine legitimacy: 'rule is legitimate when its subjects believe it to be so'.[87] As our 2011 post-election nationwide survey indicates, Lukashenko still remains popular (44% – four times greater than all other candidates) among the general population – that is, despite the bloody aftermath of the December 2010 presidential election, and the imprisonment of almost all the presidential candidates.[88]

In this section I will briefly explore what makes Lukashenko's regime legitimate – the people/president bond, which naturally reduces the need for the regime to utilize state coercion extensively. More broadly, I will also examine the normative foundations of the Belarusian society that have made Lukashenko's phenomenon possible and even flourishing in Belarusian conditions.

Regime's legitimacy

Lukashenko is and will remain absolutely legitimate if people continue to identify with him and appreciate his relatively successful social and economic policies directed at supporting communal well-being, security and stability.[89] Popular perception that, in a situation of total collapse, the country could only be saved by the president – rather than any other existing or possible agency – clearly makes the regime unwaveringly stable.

Belarus, like many other countries, has been hit hard by the economic crisis, but the effects of the global economic downturn have not yet fully resonated with the society at large, and many still feel stable and secure under Lukashenko's leadership.[90] Over a third of the polled population still believe that the state of the economy in Belarus is sound; with another 43% feeling neutral towards the overall economic performance of their country.[91] Over two thirds of the population state that their family income is relatively stable (67%) and a healthy plurality observe (46%) that it has not changed in the past year, with another 24% even declaring a slight improvement.

On balance, more people believe (over 60%) that the country is stable and developing in the right direction (as against 24% who think otherwise). Overall, about 40% of the respondents perceive their president's actions as complete or rather satisfactory, with another third feeling neutral or hesitant, which serves as a clear sign of the continuity of the president's legitimacy in Belarus in 2011.

Furthermore, if one were to choose between economic well-being and democracy/independence, well-being comes first: almost 70% (as against 22%) concur with the importance of the former. Therefore, people's positive preferences for Lukashenko come as no surprise: due to the relative efficacy of his regime and his convincing political discourse, he continues to remain the sole alternative on the Belarusian political landscape.

Why do people vote for Lukashenko? In 2008[92] they simply believed that he was successful in restoring order in society (66.3%), in building an independent and economically viable state (64.5%), in promoting collaboration within the CIS (60.1%), in not letting the 'oligarchs' rule the country (59.7%), and in

fighting crime (58.9%) and corruption (49.6%). In comparison with Soviet times, people (08/2006) also see the incumbent authority as 'close to the people' (30.4%), less bureaucratic (25.5%), strong and reliable (23.6%) as well as lawful (23.2%).

Moreover, people seem to identify with their president *knowingly* – that is, despite being aware of government corruption, allegations of political murder, media manipulation and the absolute power the president has (including being above the law) in the country. This conscious choice of the Belarusians remains a mystery to many students of politics. How can Belarusians *knowingly* identify and support Lukashenko's regime – in many eyes, an oppressive, murderous, and by many accounts, a stupefying order?

Common sense and logic suggest that indeed what Belarusians seem to treasure most is their personal security, given the legacies of the past instability and hardship – personal security above newly attained sovereignty and personal freedoms and rights. This is duly reflected in their 'strategic choice' of leadership. Belarusians 'have bread and butter' daily on the table, they are in full employment with regularly paid wages and pensions;[93] they are lavishly entertained by the state, and cared for through various (although limited) social benefits. They have made their choice of leadership because this government does not abuse/harass them individually, and because they know that in the absence of any eligible alternative, Lukashenko is their best bet.

Being different?

There is however more to this 'strategic choice' of leadership. This kind of preference for strong, orderly and authoritarian government seems common for many East European transient states vulnerable to change and desiring stability, and has far deeper roots – going well beyond pre-emptive actions of the regime itself – in society.[94] As our research indicates,[95] many countries of the former Soviet Union demonstrate an enduring proclivity for strong leadership and adherence to other-than-liberal values – those of community, tolerance, cultural heritage, etc. as opposed to democracy, lawfulness and human rights – which invariably make them *different* and so less susceptible to values and ideals of the liberal democracy, as practised by the West.

Interestingly, the normative disjunction between the West and the former Soviet Union[96] is not simply an intellectual contestation, or a projected discourse of autocratic governments in an attempt to justify their authoritarian policies. As the absolute majority of the respondents in many case studies indicated, this is deeply rooted in public perceptions whereby people clearly and uncompromisingly differentiate between Western values – of market economy, human rights, democracy and lawfulness – and their own values – of peace, tolerance, respect for cultural heritage and religion.[97]

This naturally leads to questioning the overall logic of democracy promotion by the West, which is often premised on the normative *acquis* of *liberal*

democracies and their respective vested interests.[98] As Lane contends: 'Western interests are involved in these processes – in support of groups, in Margaret Thatcher's terms, "with whom we can do business", or from a geo-strategic point of view, to change allegiances in favour of the West'.[99] The logical questions are (i) that of mutual reciprocity and indeed receptivity – that is, whether there is any common normative denominator between the aiding and the receiving sides – and (ii) whether one set of arguably more virtuous values can be successfully installed in those societies which for generations have followed a different (and often contested) path of democratic development – the path premised on different values and in many cases evincing a legitimate consensus between the people and their government.

A new scholarship is now emerging to contest the concept of liberal democracy and democracy promotion per se,[100] which insists on exposing not only the positive but also the negative forms and practices of democracy, and on the need to pluralize and contextualize democracy in each given case. It is to be hoped that this will engender a better understanding of why some transition countries may resist generous and gratuitous aid, and may even find some Western efforts offensive in their attempt to change what may be *externally* seen as 'rogue' or an 'outpost of tyranny', but internally, for what it is worth, is a perceivably legitimate order for many people in the other-than-liberal states.

Conclusions

In this article the experience of the colour revolutions in Eastern Europe, and Belarus in particular, has been examined. In the light of the continuing political turmoil and in some cases, an increased authoritarian clampdown on genuine non-confrontational forms of civic activities in the region, we have questioned the real success of the first colour revolutions in bringing about political change, let alone democratization. The all-colour endeavours in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, and later on in many more countries of the former Soviet Union, may have been democratic in their mobilization, but they evidently failed to wield any system change and thus can be more suitably theorized as 'revolutionary coup d'état', intending leadership replacement with some public support to ensure legitimacy of the 'new order'. 'These revolutionary coup d'états . . . involve the rise of different elite groups, clans or families, which seek to redistribute the assets of the previous regime'[101] and are duly promoted by the West, as those 'whom we can do business with'.[102]

The colour revolutions clearly demonstrated that international diffusion of the foreign-led revolutionary experience in the region, even if underpinned by an impressive financial backing and enthusiastic training of the revolutionaries, is an insufficient and inadequate tool to instigate change in Eastern Europe.[103] A careful account of domestic structural factors is needed in order to understand why so many colour revolutions, of the second generation (2005–2009) especially, have failed to materialize into democratic breakthroughs. Furthermore, it has been

insisted that both pluralization of the meaning of democracy and the contextualization of democracy promotion in each given case is essential in order to evaluate the readiness for and the willingness of change by a particular regime, and what kind of change in actual fact is desired.

Belarus has undermined the Western 'logic' of democracy promotion premised on templates and sponsorship, and by many accounts, offered a relatively conventional authoritarian 'response' to the attempted revolution on its doorsteps. The regime has evidently learned (through long- and short-term measures) how to defend itself and, more remarkably, it has developed skills of how to do so *legitimately*, without resorting to extensive coercion, so often anticipated from the 'outposts of tyranny'. The article has argued that Belarusian authorities, by undertaking certain immediate precautionary measures during the presidential election in March 2006, managed to maintain the status quo in a relatively peaceful and non-aggressive manner.[104] Effective learning by regimes, however, is only one side of the story, which would be incomplete without analysis of the internal (domestic) conditions that created the propitious environment for the survival and endurance of the Lukashenko regime.

It has been argued that the incumbency in Belarus is unmistakably premised on the precarious legitimacy that gives Lukashenko's regime an enviable immunity and had effectively conditioned public withdrawal from the attempts at electoral mobilization during elections. The origin of this legitimacy is many-fold and not least dependent on the efficacy of the regime and its deliverables. However, the essential part of the governing consensus has nevertheless been deeply rooted in the historical/traditional values of the society itself, the manifestation of which has been so perplexingly well epitomized by Lukashenko himself. Therefore, in order to exercise democracy promotion effectively (if such a thing is at all possible) a far deeper understanding of autocratic narratives is needed, concomitant with a much closer analysis of local societal norms and values as well as of a country's geopolitical resources and strategies.

Acknowledgement

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Notes

1. Lukashenko, 'V Belarusi Budut Sokhraneny'.
2. The years 2010 and 2011 have witnessed new uprisings in the EU Southern Neighbourhood (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Jordan, Syria, Yemen, and others), which could be classed as a third generation of the new-type ('colour') revolutions, analysis of which, due to the limits of space, is beyond the scope of this article.
3. The 'Bulldozer Revolution' in Serbia (2000) is perhaps one of the few exceptions here.

4. Kuzio, *Aspects of the Orange Revolution VI*; *Journal of Democracy*, 'Debating the Color Revolutions'; Diamond, *The Spirit of Democracy*; D'Anieri, 'Explaining the Success and Failure of Post-Communist Revolutions'; Simecka, 'Diffusion and Civil Society Mobilisation in Coloured Revolutions'.
5. This included 'Cedar Revolution' in Lebanon (2005), 'Purple Revolution' in Iraq (2005), 'Carnation Revolution' in Armenia (2007), and a 'Twitter Revolution' in Moldova (2009).
6. Lane, 'Coloured Revolution as a Political Phenomenon'; White and McAllistair, 'Rethinking the "Orange Revolution"'; Beachain, 'Roses and Tulips: Dynamics of Regime Change in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan'; Wilson, 'Belarus Between "Coloured Revolution" and "Counter-Revolutionary Technology"'.
7. Lane, 'Coloured Revolution as a Political Phenomenon', 132.
8. This term is used in opposition to the 'international diffusion' of democratic breakthroughs. For more on 'international diffusion' see Bunce and Wolchik, 'Getting Real about the "Real Causes"'; Heathershaw, 'Rethinking the International Diffusion of Coloured Revolutions'.
9. The focus of this article is the 2006 failed revolutionary attempt in Belarus. The events of the December 2010 elections and their analysis are beyond the scope of this article.
10. Rakhmanova, *Democratic Revolutionary Handbook*, a documentary which seeks to reveal the mechanics as well as the controversies of *modular (colour) revolutions* in Eastern Europe. For more information see a critical appraisal of the film at http://icarusfilms.com/new2007/demo.html.
11. The numbers varied depending on the source of reporting from 10,000 to 35,000. See for example, OSCE/ODIHR, *Republic of Belarus*; Zarakhovich, 'V Belarusi – Revolutsiya?'.
12. As the OSCE reported, in Minsk alone the number of individuals sentenced in a single day exceeded a record-breaking 200. For more information see OSCE/ODIHR, *Republic of Belarus*, 25.
13. Independent Institute for Socio-Economic and Political Studies, polls, http://www.iiseps.org/poll06.html
14. Intimidation was deployed by authorities, but it was comparably moderate and mainly covert. Large-scale violence was absent. For more information see Martinovich, 'Protokoly Chekistskikh Mudretsov'; Zarakhovich, 'V Belarusi – Revolutsiya?'; 'Ulada Baittsa Kastusia Kalinouskaga'; 'Khto Lepsh Zasvoiy Vuroki Pamaranchavai Revalyutsii?'.
15. Silitski, 'Pamyatats', shto Dyktatury Ruinyyuttsa'; Chavusau, 'Zhdani i nadzei Kastrychnitskai Ploschy'.
16. Lenin, 'May Day Action by the Revolutionary Proletariat'.
17. For more discussion see the special issue of the *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 25 (2009); Lankina and Getachew, 'A Geographic Incremental Theory of Democratization'; Burnell, 'Political Strategies of External Support for Democratization'; Carothers, 'The Backlash against Democracy Promotion'.
18. Lane, 'Coloured Revolution as a Political Phenomenon'.
19. Way, 'The Real Causes of the Color Revolutions'.
20. Levitsky and Way, 'Linkage versus Leverage'; Way and Levitsky, 'The Dynamics of Autocratic Coercion after the Cold War'.
21. Kuzio, *Aspects of the Orange Revolution VI*; *Journal of Democracy*, 'Debating the Color Revolutions'.
22. Play on words using Gregory Ioffe's title of the book, *Understanding Belarus and How Western Foreign Policy Misses the Mark*.

23. Bunce and Wolchik, 'International Diffusion and Postcommunist Electoral Revolutions'; Kuzio, *Aspects of the Orange Revolution VI*, 10–11.
24. For more information see special issue 'Rethinking the "Coloured Revolutions"', *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*.
25. Bunce and Wolchik, 'International Diffusion and Postcommunist Electoral Revolutions'.
26. Rakhmanova, *Democratic Revolutionary Handbook*, offers a comprehensive guide as to how the colour revolutions were organized in Eastern Europe.
27. Bunce and Wolchik, 'International Diffusion and Postcommunist Electoral Revolutions'.
28. A more illustrious debate concerning the role of territoriality and the role of geographical proximity has been raised by Tomila Lankina and Lullit Getachew in their seminal article 'A Geographic Incremental Theory of Democratization'. There they argue about the importance of a geographical incremental process for the pace of democratization, facilitated by the regional exposure to the external environment and its gradual adaptation to the norms and standards necessary for cooperation.
29. For more information and examples, view Tatjana Rakhmanova's documentary *Democratic Revolutionary Handbook* (2006), and references to evidence in Lane and White, *Rethinking the 'Coloured Revolutions'*.
30. Way, 'The Real Causes of the Color Revolutions', 56.
31. For more information see Beissinger, 'Structure and Example in Module Political Phenomena'; Hale, 'Regime Cycles'.
32. Beissinger, 'Structure and Example in Module Political Phenomena', 263.
33. Ibid., 272.
34. A number of successive events counteract the alleged success of colour revolutions in the region: violent outbreaks in Georgia throughout 2008–2010, government instability and permanent crisis in Ukraine since 2004; 'precarious democracy' and authoritarian trends in Kyrgyzstan especially in 2008–2009.
35. Lane, 'Coloured Revolution as a Political Phenomenon'. The article offers ample evidence to substantiate the reference to 'revolutionary coup d'état' in the case of the 'colour revolutions'.
36. Ibid., 118–19.
37. Ibid., 119.
38. Chaulia, 'Democratisation, NGOs and "Colour Revolutions"'.
39. Lane, 'Coloured Revolution as a Political Phenomenon', 116–17.
40. 'Georgia: Sliding Towards Authoritarianism?'; Brill Olcott, 'The New Political System in Kyrgyzstan'; Walker and Goehring, 'Petro-Authoritarianism and Eurasia's New Divides'.
41. For more analysis of this term refer to Lane, 'Coloured Revolution as a Political Phenomenon'.
42. Bunce and Wolchik, 'International Diffusion and Postcommunist Electoral Revolutions', 31.
43. Ibid.
44. Nye, *Soft Power*.
45. For further explanation of this claim refer to Rakhmanova's *Democratic Revolutionary Handbook*.
46. Nye, 'Why Military Power is No Longer Enough', quoted in Lane, 'Coloured Revolution as a Political Phenomenon', 115.
47. Philippov, '"Oranzhevye" tekhologii v Belorussii primenimy, no neeffectivny'.
48. Way, 'The Real Causes of the Color Revolutions', 57, emphasis added.
49. Rakhmanova, *Democratic Revolutionary Handbook* .

50. Way, 'The Real Causes of the Color Revolutions', 57.
51. Ibid., 58–9.
52. Ibid., 60.
53. Ibid., 65.
54. For more discussion see Korosteleva, 'Was There a Quiet Revolution?'; Korosteleva, 'The Limits of the EU Governance'; Korosteleva, 'Is Belarus a Demagogical Democracy?'.
55. Silitsky, 'Preempting Democracy'; Silitski, 'Pamyatats', shto Dyktatury Ruinyyuttsa'.
56. That is, when the regime manipulates public needs to legitimize its (poor) performance: in particular, when the president ordered the cutting of some public subsidies he immediately offered respective justifications (from ideological to institutional) to allay public anxiety.
57. For more extensive discussion, see Silicki, 'Belarus'; White, Korosteleva, and Lowenhardt, *Postcommunist Belarus*.
58. Leshchenko, 'The National Ideology and the Basis of Lukashenka Regime in Belarus'; Marples, 'Color Revolutions'; Marples, *The Lukashenko Phenomenon*.
59. This first of all includes legislative anti-revolution provisions (Law of Defamation of state officials; Law on Counteraction of Extremism; Law on Some Changes and Amendments into the Criminal Code Increasing Responsibility for Crime against Individuals and State Security; Changes and amendments related to some issues of financing terrorism; decrees on responsibility of acting on behalf of unregistered organizations, or criminalizing training and other preparations that may lead to the violation social order, etc). See Pontis Foundation, 'Anti-Revolution Legislation'.
60. The non-aligned states movement (NAM) is an association of about 118 developing states to represent the interests of the developing world. For more information see http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/2798187.stm.
61. Bajmukhametov, 'Apraudanne Raseiai zhorstkastsi Belaruskikh uladau vygliadae prosta zhakhliva'.
62. For closer analysis of 'authoritarian pre-emption' refer to Silitsky's 'Preempting Democracy'.
63. Lukashenko, 'V Belarusi Budut Sokhraneny Mir, Spokoistvie I Stabil'nost'.
64. Silicki, 'Belarus', 78.
65. Ibid.
66. Pop-propaganda is a technical term to describe a government's actions which target the wider population through pop-concerts, pop-entertainment etc.
67. Rakhmanova, *Democratic Revolutionary Handbook.*
68. Martinovich, 'Revolyutsii ne budet'.
69. Martinovich, 'Protokoly Chekistskikh Mudretsov', emphasis added.
70. Ibid.
71. Zarakhovich, 'V Belarusi – Revolutsiya?'.
72. Ibid.
73. Silicki, 'Belarus'.
74. Wilson, 'Belarus Between', 95.
75. 'Kresy' means 'borderland', here referring to the Polish-owned period of Belarus' history.
76. Burger, 'The Divergence between Declaratory and Action Policy'.
77. Ibid., 34.
78. Center for Political Education, 'Belarus After Election'.
79. Logvinovich, 'Aleksandru Lukashenko stalo tesno v Belorussii'.
80. Ibid.
81. Matikevich, *Nashestvie*; Sheremet and Kalinikina, *Sluchainyi President*; Feduta, *Lukashenko*.

82. Philippov, '"Oranzhevye" tekhologii v Belorussii primenimy, no neeffectivny'.
83. Nobody doubted Lukashenko's victory in elections either in 2006 or 2010, even if they were fraud-free and absolutely transparent. For more information see http://www.charter97.org/bel/news.
84. Logvinovich, 'Aleksandru Lukashenko stalo tesno v Belorussii'.
85. For full discussion of 'legitimacy' see Clark, 'Legitimacy in a Global Order', 79.
86. 'People' in this context means general public opinion, as evidenced from nation-wide opinion polls (March–April 2011).
87. Max Weber, quoted in Clark, 'Legitimacy in a Global Order'.
88. The survey was conducted during March 2011 by the Centre for Political Research, Belarusian State University, under the ESRC-funded project (RES-061-25-0001). For more information see the project website and synopsis of findings at http://www.aber.ac.uk/en/interpol/research/research-projects/europeanising-securitising-outsiders.
89. For more discussion of the economic factor see Korosteleva, 'When Time Goes Backwards'; Ioffe, *Understanding Belarus and How Western Foreign Policy Misses the Mark*.
90. This is even despite the recent terrorist attack that took place in Minsk (11 April 2011) during rush hour at the busiest interlinking underground station of the city, leaving 14 dead and over 200 injured. The author witnessed the aftermath of the event.
91. The data is quoted from the 2011 post-election survey conducted in Belarus under the ESRC-funded project 'Europeanising or securitising the outsiders' (RES-061-25-0001).
92. For more information see http://www.iiseps.org/arhdata.html, which is also corroborated by the findings of our survey, available as a synopsis from http://www.aber.ac.uk/en/interpol/research/research-pojects/europeanising-securitising-outsiders.
93. For more discussion of Belarus' economic 'miracle' and the prospects of its sustainability see Korosteleva, 'Belarus' Foreign Policy at the Time of Crisis'; Zlotnikov, 'The Belarusian Economic Miracle'; Yeremeyeva, 'The Impact of the Global Financial Crisis on Belarusian Economy'.
94. For more discussion of 'differences', especially values-based, see Korosteleva, *Eastern Partnership*.
95. For more information visit the project's website http://www.aber.ac.uk/en/interpol/research/research-projects/europeanising-securitising-outsiders.
96. The normative disjunction is far broader than is suggested here, and embraces all non-liberal democracies. In this article, however, Belarus, Russia, Ukraine and Moldova are used as the case studies of the project to substantiate the point.
97. For more information see Korosteleva, *Eastern Partnership*. Case studies included interviews with politicians, focus groups and nation-wide surveys. A synopsis of research findings can be found at http://www.aber.ac.uk/en/interpol/research/research-projects/europeanising-securitising-outsiders/.
98. The West's projection or anticipation of the adoption of liberal democracy elsewhere in the world irrespective of particular societal values, perceptions and traditions, is succinctly summarized in David Collier and Steven Levitsky's article, where they classify all 'other forms' of democracy as those with 'missing attributes' of the liberal model. For more information see 'Democracy with Adjectives'.
99. Lane, 'Coloured Revolution as a Political Phenomenon', 132.
100. Kurki, 'Democracy and Conceptual Contestability'; Hobson, 'Democracy as Civilisation'; Biryukov and Sergeyev, 'The Idea of Democracy in the West and in the East'; Duncan, *Democratic Theory and Practice*.
101. Lane, 'Coloured Revolution as a Political Phenomenon', 132.
102. Ibid., fn. 56.

103. Please see fn. 29 for further information. Note that 'unpacking Western support' was not the purpose of the article. Instead, the focus was on why Lukashenko's regime survived the colour revolutions relatively unchallenged.
104. The December 2010 presidential election and especially its aftermath, however, offer a somewhat different picture of authorities' response to the public uprising – more violent, more brutal and spontaneous. The analysis of recent events in Belarus, however, is beyond the scope of this article.

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